DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 269 337 SO 017 152

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TITLE Grant and the Black Soldier.
INSTITUTION Army Public Affairs, Washington, DC.
PUB DATE Sep 85
NOTE 17p.; For related documents, see SO 017 151-154.
PUB TYPE Historical Materials (060)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Black History; Civil Rights; *Civil War (United States); Military Science; Minority Groups; *Presidents of the United States; United States History
IDENTIFIERS *Grant (Ulysses S)

ABSTRACT

General Ulysses S. Grant reflected the prevailing views of his community and times concerning social attitudes. Although opposed to slavery, he was not a strong advocate of liberties and rights for black people. Like President Lincoln, Grant at first opposed use of black troops in the Civil War. On July 17, 1862 black recruitment was approved and black military units, led by white officers, were organized. The black soldiers performed admirably in several battles. General Grant enthusiastically endorsed participation by blacks in the wartime Army, but expressed reservations about encouraging their continuation as regulars in the full-time Army. When military necessity faded, Grant's enthusiasm for black military units declined. At the end of the war, General Grant advised against using black troops in the occupation of the defeated southland. He did support strongly passage of the Fifteenth Amendment, which gave black males the right to vote. As President, Grant wavered in support of Reconstruction laws that protected the rights of black people in the former Confederate states. In this, President Grant believed he was following the will of the majority. In racial matters, Ulysses S. Grant was primarily a reflector of public opinion, not a leader of it. A chronology of main events in Grant's life is appended. (JP)

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GRANT AND THE BLACK SOLDIER

by

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U.S. Army
NEWS RELEASE
Army Public Affairs
Washington, D.C. 20310

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE 85-062

GRANT AND THE BLACK SOLDIER

by Robert G. Lambert, Ph.D.

In his attitudes towards blacks and slavery, General (and later President) Ulysses S. Grant was no John Woolman, the gentle 18th century Quaker from New Jersey who, through a sudden revelation, perceived slavery to be a moral wrong and then spent the rest of his life persuading others to give up their slaves. Neither was Grant like the fierce abolitionist John Brown, whose hatred of slavery became an all-consuming obsession, driving him to murder pro-slavery adherents and to lead a slave insurrection at Harper's Ferry, Va., in 1859. (Then Colonel Robert E. Lee put down the rebellion when local slaves failed to join Brown's forces.)

Grant, like Lincoln, was very much a man of his time and place (Ohio in the 1820's and 30's) concerning racial attitudes. He reflected, rather than led or changed, public opinion.

Although personally opposed to slavery, Grant voted for the pro-slavery Democratic candidate James Buchanan in 1856. Grant feared the election of a Republican would rip the Republic apart and he preferred at least to delay that event so that a peaceful means of ridding America of slavery might be found. In 1860 Grant could

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not vote because of residency requirements, but he favored Lincoln's election, hoping that enough time had passed to cool the Southern, pro-slavery fire-eaters.

Lincoln's election in November, however, impelled a series of state secession declarations in January. The stage was now set for the Civil War, and three months later the Confederate cannons' firing on Fort Sumter touched off the conflict.

Initially, North and South had differing war aims. For the South, the war began as a way of preserving "that peculiar institution" -- slavery. The North was quite willing to guarantee and preserve slavery where it was then practiced, but its aim was simply to restore the Union. At one point Lincoln even considered using treasury funds to purchase the freedom of every existing slave as a cheaper alternative than armed conflict. Wrote Republican Horace Greeley, "Never on earth did the Republican Party propose to abolish slavery."

At first it was thought that a mere show of Union force and resolve would be enough to cow the Southern extremists, that the rebellion would quickly be put down. Grant himself believed this until the bloody battle of Shiloh covered acres of ground with prone bodies. "I...believed the rebellion would collapse suddenly and soon, if a decisive victory could be gained...After Shiloh I gave up all idea of saving the Union except by complete conquest."

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BLACKS AND THE UNION ARMY

The rebellion quickened the hearts of Northern blacks, many of whom tried to enter the Union Army both as a way of freeing their Southern brothers and sisters and of guaranteeing full citizenship for themselves. But even though blacks had fought in both the Revolution and the War of 1812, enlistment was initially forbidden.

It was to be a white man's war to reunite the Republic, not to free the slaves. Indeed, one Union general even returned escaping slaves to the lash of their Southern owners, ordering a truce in the fighting to accomplish this mission! To his credit, Grant never did so and even issued this order: "In no case whatever will permission be granted to citizens...to pass through camps to look for fugitive slaves. All slaves...used in any matter hostile to the Government ...will under no circumstances be permitted to return to their masters" (Feb. 26, 1862).

Since the North still regarded slaves as Southern property, only those blacks working militarily against the Union were considered contraband property, similar to a shipment of rifles or gunpowder, and thus legally could be seized and retained by the Federal government without threatening to undermine the institution of slavery itself. (Lincoln was still wooing the undecided border states and did not wish to force them onto the Confederate side.)

Yet it soon became clear that such Northern "concern" for slavery did nothing to mollify the South but instead guaranteed to

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that region a vast source of labor that freed Southern whites to continue in arms against Federal forces.

Early Union defeats at Bull Run threatened Washington itself and convinced many that the war would not be short or easily won. The need for Northern manpower increased, and the laws against recruiting blacks were eventually overturned.

Initial reservations about using black troops were twofold: one, prejudiced whites might simply refuse to fight side-by-side with blacks and two, blacks were widely viewed as servile and cowardly. Lincoln was concerned about antagonizing slaveholders in the border states and also feared that many of the weapons distributed to blacks would end up in Confederate hands.

But Thomas W. Higginson, abolitionist and leader of the First South Carolina Volunteers (white officers commanded black units), voiced major reasons for enlisting blacks. First, former slaves often knew the countryside and could provide invaluable combat intelligence; second, many blacks fought with "Cromwellian invincibility," convinced they were on the side of God and that He ordained this time for the abolition of slavery and that they were His appointed agents.

Bowing to the inevitable, the Federal government recognized the truth in a statement by black Boston attorney Robert Morris, "If the government would recruit blacks ...there was not a man who would not leap for his knapsack and musket, and they would make it intolerably hot for Old Virginia."

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THE UNION ARMY RECRUITS BLACKS

On July 17, 1862, black recruiting was authorized, and Lincoln began formulating the Emancipation Proclamation that would forever end the Federal recognition of slavery in the rebellious states starting on the first day of 1863.

The question as to whether blacks would serve bravely and efficiently as soldiers was answered under Grant's command ten months later on May 27, 1863, at the battle of Port Hudson, a Confederate stronghold on the lower Mississippi. Although the attack failed, a white officer who witnessed the action stated, "You have no idea how my prejudices with regard to Negro troops have been dispelled by the battle...They are far superior in discipline to the white troops, and just as brave."

Two months later at Fort Wagner, a Confederate fort guarding Charleston Harbor, black troops led by Col. Robert Shaw of the 54th Massachusetts Regiment suffered heavy losses in a fruitless charge against rebel guns. Yet the unflinching courage of Shaw's Regiment, according to the New York Tribune, "made Fort Wagner such a name to the colored race as Bunker Hill has been for ninety years to the white Yankees." The unit was later honored by an Augustus Saint-Gaudens statue facing the State House from the edge of the Boston Common.

Although Grant did not fully support blacks as regulars in the full time Army, he did accept blacks in the Army as a wartime

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measure. In a private letter to Lincoln, Grant enthusiastically commented,

> "I have given the subject of arming the negro my hearty support. This, with the emancipation of the negro, is the heavyest sic blow yet given the Confederacy...We have added a powerful ally. They will make good soldiers and taking them from the enemy weakens him in the same proportion they strengthen us. I am therefore most decidedly in favor of pushing this policy to the enlistment of a force sufficient to hold all the South falling into our hands and to aid in capturing more."

Yet black troops faced dangers unknown to most white soldiers. Upon capture they were subject to enslavement or summary lynching, and white officers leading black units were subject to execution under Southern laws originally aimed at fomenters of slave rebellions.

At Fort Pillow, Southern rage at black troops and their border state white "turncoat" officers exploded in a frenzy of slaughter under the infamous confederate General Bedford Forrest. Even today, estimates of the number of Union prisoners murdered after they surrendered this Tennessee River strongpoint vary from about sixty to over two hundred.

Over a century later, voices can still be heard from that infamous day, April 12, 1864.

Black Soldier: "Please don't shoot me!"

Confederate: "Damn you! You are fighting against your master!"

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Black Soldier in later testimony: "He raised his gun and fired, and the bullet went into my mouth and out the back of my head. They threw me in the river, and I swam around and hung on there in the water until night."

Other black troops were buried alive. The wounded were placed into wooden buildings, termed "hospitals," which were then set on fire. An eight-year-old black child was shot to death, and one white officer was crucified and later set afire!

Concluded General Forrest about the incident, "A terrible retribution, in any event, has befallen the ignorant, deluded Africans."

Yet the massacre at Fort Pillow served to strengthen black resolve. During Grant's Virginia campaign of 1864, one officer wrote of a black unit,

> "The real fact is, the rebels will not stand against our colored soldiers when there is any chance of their being taken prisoners, for they are conscious of what they justly deserve. Our men went into these works after they were taken yelling, 'Fort Pillow!' The enemy well knows what this means, and I will venture the assertion that that piece of infernal brutality enforced by them there has cost the enemy already two men for every one they so inhumanly murdered."

The use of black troops also had the unintended effect of freezing prisoner exchanges, for often the Confederates would not parole black prisoners. Grant refused to accept segregated

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repatriation. This Southern policy also played into Union hands, as Grant had far more manpower to draw on, and the return of Southern prisoners would inhibit the policy of attrition, the "complete conquest," seen as necessary to force victory.

WOULD THE SOUTH ALSO USE BLACK TROOPS?

If the use of black combatants had proved so helpful to the Northern cause, what was the attitude of the Confederacy to a similar employment of black forces?

For the South, the arming of blacks provided theoretical and practical difficulties. First, in 1861 Vice President of the Confederacy, Alexander Stephens, announced that "Our Confederacy is founded upon...the great truth that the negro is not equal to the white man, that slavery...is his natural and normal condition. This, our new Government, is the first in the history of the world, based upon this great physical and moral truth."

Four years later General Howell Cobb still opposed arming the slaves even though the Confederacy was collapsing around him. "You cannot make soldiers of slaves," he said. "The day you make soldiers of them is the beginning of the end of the revolution. If slaves will make good soldiers our whole theory of slavery is wrong."

Nevertheless, the desperate military situation caused by Grant's persistence prompted a decision to arm Southern blacks with the promise of freedom at the end of the war. Ironically, this decision

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came too late in the twilight of the Confederacy, not even two weeks before Petersburg and Richmond fell.

So Southern blacks had no opportunity to fight on any large scale for what remained of the Confederacy.

AFTERMATH

Faced with the problem of occupying the defeated, sullen South with Federal troops, Grant advised against using blacks as occupation troops. Such an act would, he felt, only serve to inflame the local populace and, unless entire black units were used, needlessly endanger individual soldiers.

SUMMARY

Like Lincoln, Grant initially opposed the use of black troops. But reflecting the mood and needs of his time, he accepted, and became enthusiastic over, their performance. When Lincoln visited the Petersburg line, Grant took him to the black units that had performed so outstandingly. When military necessity faded, however, Grant's enthusiasm faltered.

POSTWAR GRANT

After the war, Grant's racial record is mixed. He enthusiastically supported the Fifteenth Amendment, guaranteeing the vote to black males, yet when Southern opposition erupted, Grant feebly

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turned to an inactive Congress and in the end could not ensure that the great Reconstruction laws he helped build would truly function to help blacks in the real world of the embittered, unreconstructed South.

Concerning other issues, Grant would probably be labeled in modern terms a segregationist since he tried to buy the Dominican Republic and use it as a colony for blacks.

Hovering around Grant is the tantalizing aura of the fallen (or perhaps embryonic ?) angel. He could have a been a Victorian FDR. Yet as great and impressive as he was a battlefield commander, Grant could never fully translate these qualities of decisiveness and command presence into politics. However right Grant's instincts might have been, biographer William S. McFeeley concludes that Grant's early business failures created in him such a fear of once again being a "nobody" -- of being hurled back into obscurity and poverty -- that Grant identified too much with the rich and powerful, forgetting and rejecting his own common origins.

That, coupled with his conviction that Congress truly reflected the will of the people and should be the chief decision-making body whose will the President should merely execute, insured that Grant could never become the great President he possessed the talent and intelligence to be.

In political as well as in racial matters, Grant was always too much a mirror, too little a beacon.

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Dr. Robert G. Lambert is a professor of journalism and American literature. His last academic post was at Virginia State University in Petersburg, Virginia.

Suggested Further Readings on Grant and Black Soldiers in the Civil War:

Personal Memoirs of U.S. Grant, DaCapo, 1982. (Completed 1885.)

Grant: A Biography by William S. McFeeley, Norton, 1981.

A Brave Black Regiment: History of the Fifty-Fourth Regiment of the Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry by Luis F. Emilio, Arno, 1969

The Negro's Civil War by James M. McPherson, Pantheon, 1965

A History of Negro Troops in the War of the Rebellion: 1861-65 by George W. Williams, Bergmon, 1968 (First published in 1888)

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CHRONOLOGY OF GENERAL U. S. GRANT
APRIL 27, 1822 -- JULY 23, 1885

Based on a Chronology compiled by
General Sir James Marshall-Cornwall from
Grant as a Military Commander, Van Nostrand, 1970.

April 27, 1822	Hiram Ulysses Grant born in Ohio
June 14, 1839	Mix-up in name registers Ulysses Simpson Grant as West Point cadet
July, 1843	From West Point, Grant commissioned in 4th Infantry
March, 1846	Mexican War begins
September 13, 1847	Grant promoted on battlefield to Brevet Captain
February 2, 1848	Mexican War ends
August 22, 1848	Grant marries Julia Dent
March, 1852	Grant's regiment ordered to California
July 31, 1854	Grant resigns Army commission
October 16, 1859	John Brown's raid
November 6, 1860	Lincoln elected
April 12, 1861	Civil War starts
April 23, 1861	Grant rejoins Army at Springfield, Ill.
June 17, 1861	Grant promoted to Colonel
August 7, 1861	Grant promoted to Brigadier-General
February 6, 1862	Grant captures Ft. Henry (Tenn.)
February 16, 1862	Grant captures Ft. Donelson and is promoted to Major-General of Volunteers
April 6-7, 1862	Grant and Buell defeat Johnston and Beauregard at Shiloh

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GRANT CHRONOLOGY

July 11, 1862	Grant appointed by Lincoln to command Armies of Tennessee and Mississippi
October 3-4, 1862	Grant defeats Van Dorn at Corinth, Miss.
October 16, 1862	Grant takes command of the Department of Tennessee
January 1, 1863	Emancipation Proclamation
July 1-4, 1863	Battle of Gettysburg
July 4, 1863	Vicksburg falls to Grant; Grant promoted to Major-General
November 24-25, 1863	Battle of Chattanooga; Grant defeats Bragg
March 3, 1864	Lincoln brings Grant to Washington to command Union Army
March 9, 1864	Grant promoted to Lieutenant General
May 4-6, 1864	Wilderness Battle between Grant and Lee in Virginia
May 9-19, 1864	Battle of Spotsylvania, Va.
June 1-3, 1864	Lee repulses Grant at Cold Harbor
July 30, 1864	Petersburg mine crater attack fails
November 8, 1864	Lincoln re-elected
February 9, 1865	Lee appointed Commander of all Confederate forces
April 2, 1865	Lee abandons Petersburg and Richmond
April 9, 1865	Lee surrenders at Appomattox
April 14, 1865	Lincoln assassinated
November 4, 1868	Grant elected President
November 4, 1872	Grant re-elected President
July 25, 1885	Grant dies after completing Memoirs

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